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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest briefly profiles the approach to emergent literacy used by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation; comments on the process of understanding the connections between drawing, writing, and reading; and offers guidelines for supporting children's writing. It is argued that the process of learning to write begins in infancy, and that it is important to resist the pressure to introduce skill and drill practice in children's early years. It is also important for adults to recognize that graphic experimentation at the preschool and kindergarten levels allows children to use comfortable, nonconventional forms of writing to express complex thoughts. (RH)

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Encouraging Young Children's Writing

Jane Maehr

Many educators and parents assume that young children must progress through a sequence of clearly defined skill areas to acquire listening, speaking, reading, and, finally, writing facility. As a result, young children often are not encouraged to write until they have learned how to read and have mastered the mechanics of writing (grammar, capitalization, punctuation).

Recent studies in emergent literacy—the early stages of learning to write and read—have shown that young children compose before they know much about the conventions of writing and reading or have the skill to control the formation of letters. As young children gradually realize the usefulness of writing—even unconventional writing—they are encouraged to develop related literacy skills.

High/Scope's Approach to Emergent Literacy

A developmental approach to literacy emphasizes the gradual emergence of skills in all areas of language rather than the end results of this process: formal skills in speaking, reading, and writing. Such a developmental approach is used by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti, Michigan. High/Scope curriculum developers and teaching adults recognize that preschoolers and kindergartners have plenty of ideas and enjoy composing and reading their compositions.

Children in High/Scope preschool and kindergarten classrooms, centers, and homes often write and read in unconventional forms (scribblings, drawings, letter-like marks) in order to relate their thoughts and experiences. Such attempts to communicate are not viewed as mistakes. Instead, young children are encouraged to "write" without worrying about the mechanics of writing. However, teachers and parents don't adopt a hands-off or *laissez-faire* approach to literacy development. Instead, they support the naturalness of learning about reading and writing by enriching the atmosphere in which children live and learn. In such an enriched atmosphere, authentic reasons for learning to write and read are readily apparent to children, and they have opportunities to hear good literature and use language in many forms to accomplish tasks.

In High/Scope learning settings, children are given numerous opportunities to observe purposeful writing. For example, on the first day at the High/Scope Demonstration Preschool, each child chooses an identification symbol that is used to label his or her cubby, artwork, and other belongings. Children's symbols are usually drawings of shapes or familiar objects (for example, a circle, star, or tree). Each child's symbol is displayed on an identification sign that also includes the child's name and photo. Children use their symbols daily.

Teachers and other adults involve children in writing messages, notes to parents, and lists of things to do. Because the symbols and processes of writing are commonplace in High/Scope early learning environments, children can observe the relationship between spoken and written language. Preschools, kindergartens, and day care homes or centers have some type of "writing area" or "office center." In a preschool or day care program, the writing area may simply be an informal arrangement, such as a table with writing implements and materials. In a kindergarten, it may be a full-fledged activity area. Whatever the setting, the place where children are encouraged to "write" should be stocked with a variety of writing tools. Most important, it should be a place where children feel free to write in their own way.

Children who respond in such a setting by saying "I can't write" or "I don't know how," or who assume that an adult will automatically write for them, will soon learn that the adults believe that the children can write. Adults respond warmly to all attempts children make to write, even when these attempts result in the random scribbles, letter-like marks, and drawings that children call writing. Adults ask such open-ended questions as, "Tell me what you've written" or "That's interesting . . . what about this part?" When adults respond positively to all efforts at written language, children learn that their decision to take a risk with writing was worthwhile.

Even casual observers of young children's writing will see that they often combine conventional and unconventional print. Some preschoolers, and many kindergartners, know how to write their names conventionally. However, most preschoolers are more comfortable with scribbling their messages or attempting representational drawings than with trying to write in conventional form. Occasionally,

preschoolers will move on to forming letter-like units or even a letter or two from their names. At the beginning of the school year, some kindergartners will be able to string nonphonetic letters together in imitation of print. As the year progresses, some will begin to invent the spelling of isolated words and compile lists of words they know.

It's important for adults to recognize that such experimentation at the preschool and kindergarten levels allows children to use comfortable, nonconventional forms of writing to express complex thoughts. By encouraging children to write in their own way, adults assure that the composition process as a whole does not stand or fall on children's knowledge of, or skill in, conventional writing.

Understanding the Connections Between Drawing, Writing, and Reading

When adults use the teaching techniques of the emergent literacy approach, they understand the relationships between children's drawing, writing, and reading. They realize that some children may consider their drawings to be actual writing. If asked to "read" their text, these children will respond with a clear message or story. Older children may recognize that drawing is an illustrative form, but still continue to use it as writing.

It is important to resist the pressure to introduce skill and drill practice in children's early years. Forcing young children to practice writing out-of-context words they do not understand and cannot read; suggesting that they print letters so that they fit in lined spaces; insisting that words always be spelled conventionally; and overemphasizing practice with discrete letter and sound relationships will not make children become better writers and readers. In fact, such demands may make it less likely that children will develop a pleasurable association between reading and writing.

Supporting Children's Writing

The process of learning to write begins in infancy. The positive oral and written language experiences children have at home, day care, preschool, and kindergarten contribute to the developing capacity to communicate in writing.

Adults in day care settings and preschools can promote the development of writing skills by offering numerous informal opportunities for children to observe, explore, and experiment with writing. When children observe that adults are writing in order to accomplish real tasks, they learn the value and function of writing. Caregivers can involve the children in writing brief notes to parents or listing the foods that are to be purchased for the next day's snack time. It's a good idea to have a box of writing tools and materials available for children to use when they want to write their own way. The materials can be arranged on a special table set aside for this purpose.

Although informal opportunities to write should continue at the kindergarten level, it's also appropriate for adults to begin to provide slightly more formal and organized opportunities. For example, adults can set aside a special time when children are asked to work in the "office center." The office center can also be available as an option for children at work time. In the office center, children should easily find everything they need to write names, design signs, send notes, record telephone numbers, or write stories.

Although many kindergartners can recognize some letters, words, and phrases, they may revert to drawing or scribbling when encouraged to write a story. Adults should accept this as a valuable attempt at writing and avoid prodding children to write only in words.

In the course of the year, some kindergartners will experiment with phonetic spelling and begin to move closer to conventional forms. Teachers should treat such developments as part of the natural process of emerging literacy. Attempts to use emerging skills should be warmly supported, not pushed or scrutinized for errors. The developmental approach emphasizes learning experiences that are meaningful to children, and not drill and practice of isolated skills.

This digest was adapted from the article "Right! Young Children Can Write!" by Jane Maehr, which appeared in *Extensions: Newsletter of the High Scope Curriculum*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (November/December 1989): 1-4.

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